



## **E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., F.I.C.S., 1927-1974**

### **An African Pioneer Neurosurgeon**

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Professor E. Latunde Odeku, B.S., M.D. (Howard), L.M.C.C. (Canada), D.A.B.N.S., F.I.C.S., F.A.C.S., F.M.C.S., (Nig.), the pioneer of neurosurgery in Nigeria and chief of the Neurosurgery Unit at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, died on Tuesday, August 20, 1974, at the Hammer-smith Hospital, Ducane Road, London, England, after a protracted illness. He was 47.

Latunde Odeku was born at Awe in Oyo Province of Western Nigeria on June 29, 1927, the son of a Baptist deacon. He obtained his preliminary education in Lagos, Nigeria, where he attended St. John's School, Aroloya and later the Methodist Boys' High School, where he passed the London Matriculation Examination in 1945.

In 1947, he went to the United States where he received his undergraduate and professional medical education, graduating from Howard University, Washington, D.C. with the B.S. degree in zoology in 1950 and the M.D. of the same University in 1954. He served his internship at the University Hospital, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1954-55, and majored in pathology under the late Professor Carl V. Weller, M.D. At the end of his medical internship, he travelled to the University of Western Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons where he passed the examination for the Licentiate of the Medical Council of Canada.

It was to gain first hand knowledge of the problems of medical practice in the tropics, the milieu where he was to spend a good deal of his career as a neurosurgeon, that he paid a brief visit to Nigeria in 1955. He served as Medical Officer in the Lagos General Hospital from August 1955 to June 1956.

In the following July, he was back at Michigan where he served for one year as assistant resident in general surgery under the late Professor Frederick A. Collier. During the next three years he trained in neurosurgery at the University of Michigan Medical Center, Ann Arbor, under the guidance of Professor Edgar A. Kahn and his associate, Dr. Richard C. Schneider. Toward the end of his training, he served for brief spells as senior neurosurgical resident at St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital and the Veterans Administration Hospital, both in

Ann Arbor and at the Wayne County General Hospital, Eloise, under Dr. Wyne W. Glas. He also received research training in experimental neurology under Professor Elizabeth C. Crosby, Ph.D. of the University of Michigan.

A Relm Foundation Grant at Ann Arbor facilitated his training in neuropathology which he continued at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. from July 1960 to June 1961. He spent the next four months as Chief Resident in Pediatric Neurosurgery at the Children's Hospital, Philadelphia under Eugene N. Spitz, M.D. In November 1961, he became a diplomate of the American Board of Neurological Surgery.

Dr. Odeku was appointed lecturer in neuroanatomy in his alma mater, and consultant neurosurgeon at the Freedmen's Hospital of the same institution for the academic year of 1961-62. He could have stayed on, with all the economic advantages of practising neurosurgery in the U.S.A., but his philosophy led him to decide to return to his native land, to embark on the "practice of neurosurgery specialty, with clinical and basic research in its various aspects, as well as its teaching at one or more of the medical centres actively developing at home in Nigeria, West Africa."

An *avant garde* of tropical neurology, Professor Odeku will be best remembered for his many contributions to neurological surgery in Nigeria in particular and in Africa in general. He came to the University of Ibadan in October 1962 as a lecturer in neurosurgery, bringing with him many neurosurgical instruments which he purchased at great personal expense. In addition, he placed at the disposal of the University and its teaching hospital his highly developed and disciplined surgical conscience and skill and a sustained meticulous devotion to patient care which soon became legendary. In 1963, he was promoted to senior lecturer at Ibadan and elected a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. In 1965, he became a full professor of surgery.

As a teacher, his presentations were didactic, highly organised and convincingly clear. As a clinician, he had the uncanny ability of quickly getting down to essentials in diagnosis, whether at the busy outpatient clinics or at the formal

medical conferences. A prolific writer, he published at least 100 scientific papers on neurology. He sent his earliest papers to local journals, so as to make West Africans aware of the emergence of the novel discipline of neurosurgery at Ibadan. Later, he published extensively in overseas journals. He was on the editorial boards of the *Journal of the Nigerian Medical Association*, *African Journal of Medical Sciences*, *West African Medical Journal* and the *International Surgery Journal*.

His wide experience is shown by the many professional and academic bodies to which he belonged. He was a member of the American Association of Neuropathologists, the Harvey Cushing Society, Congress of Neurological Surgeons of the U.S.A., New York Academy of Sciences, Science Association of Nigeria, Nigerian Society of Neurological Sciences, of which he was president, 1970-73, and the Pan African Association of Neurological Sciences. He was a Fellow of the International College of Surgeons, the College of Surgeons of West Africa and the Nigerian Medical Council in Surgery.

Professor Odeku was an entertaining and stimulating speaker who travelled widely in the interest of tropical neurology. He was the W.H.O. exchange professor of neurosurgery at the Department of Surgery, Université Lovanium, Kinshasa, Congo, in April 1971, when he gave lectures on various aspects of neurosurgery in the developing countries. He was the Nigerian representative at the meeting of delegates to the 10th International Congress of Neurology, Barcelona, in June 1971. It was largely through his persuasive effort that 'Tropical Neurology' came out as one of the major themes of the subsequent neurology meeting in Barcelona in 1973. He was the energetic convener of the Pan African symposium on 'Tumors of the Nervous System in the African' which was held at the Faculty of Medicine in Nairobi, Kenya, in January 1972. In September of the same year, he gave special lectures on health and welfare at the John F. Kennedy Medical Centre and the Medical School of Monrovia, Liberia.

Neurosurgery lectures also carried him to various parts of North America where he shared his rich experience in Africa with his peers. In 1963, he was the guest lecturer in neurosurgery at Ann Arbor. In 1970, he was the Edgar Kahn professorial lecturer at the University of Michigan; visiting professor at the University of Kansas; guest speaker at the College of Medicine, Howard University, Washington, D.C., and one of the invited participants at the 20th Annual Conference of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons which was held at St. Louis, Missouri in October 1970.

If he shunned parties and attempted to keep out of administrative commitments, it was because he wanted little or no distraction from his dedication to neurosurgery. The sound judgment, delightful quick wit, rich imagination and creative thinking which he reflected in his daily practice of neurosurgery would certainly have adorned any administration. No wonder that when he became Head of the Department of Surgery and Dean of the Medical School, University of Ibadan, between 1968 and 1971, he discharged his duties

successfully with definitive approach to problems, unruffled and without emotional upheavals. As a fitting attestation of his scholarship, his alma mater, Howard University, awarded him its *Alumni Medal* in 1973, for his contributions to medical science and education.\*

An extremely humble man and humane doctor, Professor Odeku carried his six feet of handsome physique with a quiet unhurried grace and confidence. A gentleman with great personal charm, his many friends at home and abroad and all his relations will sadly miss his magnanimity and selflessness, his kindness and serenity and his repertoire of crisp, witty anecdotes.

One of his hobbies was poetry reading and writing. It is impossible to understand the complexity of his nature and his recipe for the solution of problems without reading his two beautiful books of poetry, *Twilight* and *Whispers from the Night*. They constitute some of the most touching and least flamboyant odysseys ever composed. His third volume which he completed just before his death is almost ready for publication.

During his terminal illness, he showed great fortitude and never lost his gift of lively conversation and good humour. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Peter's Church, Burnham, Bucks, England, on 27th August, in a simple Christian ceremony, just as he had requested, and in consonance with the quiet unpretentious way in which he lived. He is survived by his wife, Katherine Jill, a medical doctor and member of the British Medical Association, and two daughters and two sons.

Many tributes have been showered on Professor Odeku from far and wide by his patients, colleagues and leaders of government in Africa. There is perhaps no better epitaph than the one he wrote in the *Twilight* one night in November 1962 at Ibadan, Nigeria

*On the last page  
Not his noble birth,  
Or his illustrious sires;  
Neither his trophies nor his fame:  
Not his dynasty, not his might,  
Not his knowledge, or his wits . . .*

*But his simple way  
All what he has been to his fellowmen  
His highest note, perhaps unnoticed,  
His glory, unpretentious;  
His purest testimony . . .  
That "he was a good man."*

The early death of Latunde Odeku leaves unfulfilled many of his ideas, and Africa, and tropical neurology in particular, will be poorer for the passing of this versatile professor, pioneer neurosurgeon, philosopher and poet.

*"When comes such another?"*

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